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The integration of dance as a dramatic element in broadway musical theatre

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THE INTEGRATION OF DANCE AS
A DRAMATIC ELEMENT IN
BROADWAY MUSICAL
THEATRE

by

Robert G. Dame

A thesis submitted in partial
fulfillment of the
requirements for
the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Theatre Arts

Department of Theatre Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
August 1995

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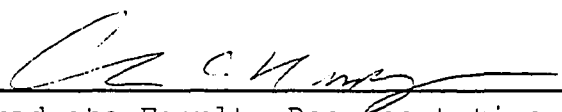
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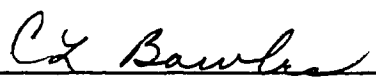
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ABSTRACT

This study traces the development and growth of dance on the Broadway stage and the parallel growth of the effectiveness of choreography in enhancing the musical Theatre libretto. The study surveys the origins and early evolution of stage dance in the United States from 1775 to the introduction of ballet choreography in 1922. It concludes with an examination of Selected scripts which use choreography to dramatize the musical Theatre libretto, 1922 to 1990.

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CHAPTER 1

THE OVERTURE

The intention here is not to write a comprehensive history of the American musical theatre, but to survey the achievements of its dance as a dramatic element. In the best musical plays of the Broadway tradition, dances are more than simple decorations or diversions. Rather, they establish character, further plot development, and intensify dramatic conflicts.

We know that ancient Greeks performed plays with music and dance accompaniment. They sang and danced choral passages to flute music. Dance choreography can take on dramatic meaning and function because of its movement, gesture, and costumes. The first association of a musical phrase with a character or situation carries over throughout the drama, and so not only the overt actions of the character but also their thoughts and states of feeling become more apparent to the

audience.¹ This is the rationale behind the leitmotif, a fragment of music that comes to represent a character or object of importance.²

Brockett identifies two types of music and dance in musical theatre: *incidental*, which is not an integral part of the dramatic action and *Dramatic* that forwards the story, reveals character, or establishes mood and style.³ The choreographer's art as a dramatist consists of choosing movements and gestures appropriate for the expression required in a dramatic situation. These movements then take on specific meaning when associated with the words in a musical texture. In short, the critical survey which this paper comprises regards the traditional tools of composition, melody, its harmonization, change of key, rhythm, and dance choreography, as elements of dramaturgy.

The view from the end of the twentieth century affords a perspective unavailable to earlier critics

¹

Oscar G. Brockett, *The Theatre: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 93.

² Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1990), 4.

³ Oscar G. Brockett, *The Theatre: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 662.

namely, that there is now a repertoire of American musical theatre pieces, a repertoire that has undergone a process of criticism just as other repertoires have. From the thousands of shows composed since the turn of the century, perhaps two or three dozen have survived to be regularly performed. The rise of a repertoire that behaves like other serious repertoire is difficult to dismiss. Even so, critics often dismiss it because they may root the music in popular styles rather than "serious" or "cultivated" or "classical" styles.⁴

Whether the Broadway musical will remain a purely popular tradition is open to question, but that its origins are popular is undeniable. The theatrical elements were drawn from the traditions of vaudeville, burlesque, and popular stage plays; the songs of the early 1910s and 1920s were written by the same men who composed for the publishers of Tin Pan Alley. Both Jerome Kern and George Gershwin began their careers as song pluggers in music publishing houses. The training of many of even the greatest talents of Broadway was

⁴ Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 8.

limited in ways that seem incredible to day. Richard Rodgers, who always composed at the piano, never learned enough technique to play classical chamber music, despite an effort with formal lessons in the middle of his career.⁵

On the other hand, you can see elements of the art music and dance tradition of the West creeping into Broadway from the late 1910s onward, a harbinger of the increasingly serious intentions of certain composers and choreographers. Victor Herbert was a fine classical cellist, and the principal operetta composers of the 1920s, Sigmund Romberg and Rudolf Friml, were trained in Europe. Gershwin had formal training in harmony and counterpoint, although not before he was well established on Broadway, and of course his *Porgy and Bess* is known as an "opera" in the serious sense. Cole Porter studied with Vincent d'Indy in Paris. The Choreographer George Balanchine trained with the Russian Imperial Ballet school in St. Petersburg and Agnes de Mille, whose background was in modern dance,

⁵ Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages* (New York: Random House, 1976), 202.

was the literate and accomplished master of characterization in dance appropriately disposed to the story telling of the musical play. Such examples proliferate later in the century: Jerome Robbins, the choreographer for *West Side Story*, went on to a position with the New York City Ballet. Leonard Bernstein's career need not be detailed here, but it is less well known that Stephen Sondheim studied composition with Milton Babbitt, or that Andrew Lloyd Webber was trained from boyhood in classical horn, violin, and piano.⁶

The style of Broadway's music and dance is eclectic by nature, able to absorb and put to dramatic use a variety of music and dance. However, its contributing sources then were always popular, because they had to please their public, and were thus denied the advances and pretensions of the European avant-garde. Broadway composers and choreographers were left free to continue to explore the possibilities of a musical style which in learned circles had become old

⁶ Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 9.

fashioned and, in the individualistic world of the twentieth century, unacceptable. They were also free to draw on the newer popular styles of jazz and rock. The most ingenious of these composers and choreographers found that they could market their creations without sacrificing their dramatic ideals. There were substantial departures from the norm, *Porgy and Bess* was produced and did run for several months; *Oklahoma!* did begin without a chorus number; *Carousel* did have a few odd-sounding chords during its prelude and did kill off its main character. Gradually, the Broadway composers and choreographers came to realize that if their musical dramaturgy was convincing enough, they could include most anything they wanted.⁷

The most important constraints imposed on Broadway by the popular tradition were the technical ones. Popular songs can be most expressive, and composers learned to make them dramatically effective as well, but their expressive and dramatic range is limited, first by their length and second by the

⁷ Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 10.

musical languages to which they have recourse.

American popular songs are simple in form and are generally quite short. These features limit not so much what can be expressed but to what degree it can be conveyed. The affective climaxes that one hears in the classical operas are impossible because there is not enough time to prepare them in a Broadway song. Mozart can prepare a climax finale for twenty minutes, and Wagner for an entire act, but a theatre song must make its point and quit within a very few minutes. Only by constructing musical relationships across the entire drama could Broadway composers create similar effects, and that level of composition was beyond all but a handful of the best musical plays of the tradition.⁸

The tradition assimilated most popular styles during the century, but at its core was a simplified nineteenth-century Romanticism. Musical expressions and constructions based on melodic phrasing and thematic processes are common in Broadway songs, but extreme chromatic effects are not, and the tonal center is

⁸ Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theater*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 8.

generally clear at any point. Composers were free to mix in elements of jazz and rock when those styles became popular, but they turned out to be useful only in certain types of dramatic situations.⁹

This is a factor that has constrained the tradition in significant ways, but has left room for achievement. The significance of the achievement can be seen in the resilience of the repertoire grown up over the last six decades and in the attraction that the tradition has had for "serious" musicians and choreographers such as Gershwin, Bernstein, Balanchine, de Mille and Robbins.

The popular nature of the tradition does not undermine the search for a real musical dramaturgy, although it may limit the scope of the dramaturgy. The composers themselves seemed to understand their role: Kern spoke of himself as the "musical clothier" of a dramatic situation,¹⁰ and Rodgers and Hammerstein spent weeks and weeks discussing dramatic problems of

⁹ Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 11.

¹⁰ Michael Freedland, *Jerome Kern*, (New York: Stein and Day, 1978), 57.

organization before a single word or note was written. That Stephen Sondheim actually researched the historical and cultural setting of his *Pacific Overture* (1976), as did Webber and Rice for their *Evita* (1979), shows how much the dramatic acumen of the most serious composers has developed.¹¹

Broadway dance is worth criticizing because its best works can have value without attempting the dimension of the European ballet masterworks, what Francis Fergusson calls "the limited perfection of the minor dramatic genres."¹² The achievements are simpler and the expectations are smaller. The abiding popularity and undeniable position of these plays in American culture warrants a more serious look than critics have given them in the past.

Because this is not a history, scripts which are important primarily because of some historical reason are not included unless they are musically and choreographically valuable as well. There are some

¹¹ Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 11.

¹² Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater: A Study of Ten Plays The Art of Drama in Changing Perspective* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949), 2.

shows whose quality so impressed their contemporary audiences that they influenced the course of the tradition in their own right. *Oklahoma!* and *West Side Story* have been recognized by much of the world as worthy of presentation in their own languages. *A Chorus Line* has a novel approach to plot, and its success makes it difficult to ignore.

This is not to say that plays this study analysis are to be accepted as unqualified artistic successes. The most compelling moments in these plays warrant attention if the variety of dramatic achievement is to be understood, but none of these plays is without significant weakness or flaws. The evaluation of these flaws can be just as instructive, in terms of the overall assessment of the American musical theater, as the analysis of the high points. The opposite perspectives of success and failure enhance an understanding of musical and dance dramaturgy. Beyond the serious recognition of the value in the Broadway tradition, it is this sort of understanding that this paper seeks to promote.

CHAPTER 2

STAGE DANCE 1775 - 1922

At the end of the 18th century, American stage entertainment followed the practice popular in contemporary England of featuring an after piece appended to the evening's entertainment. As in England, the most popular and consistently offered after piece was the pantomime. A distant relative of the *commedia dell'arte*, the Harlequin pantomimes that became popular in colonial America adapted national themes, famous heroes, patriotic incidents, or an occasional classical subject as frameworks for the exploits of the stock characters: Harlequin, his lover Columbine, her father Pantaloon, and the comic servant Clown. Where contemporary drama relied on refinements of thought, language, and form, pantomimes favored the more theatrical effects achieved by scenery, costume, special effects, acrobatic display, and dance. The

pantomime developed for American audiences liberated the form from the conventions of its English antecedents, thus allowing for more topical commentary on serious and trivial issues of the day. Colonial audiences favored two approaches to the pantomime: the nautical and the patriotic. Prominent examples carried titles like *Harlequin Shipwrecked; Shipwrecked Mariners Preserved; Fourth of July, or, The Sailor's Festival; American Independence*; and *The Battle of Trenton*. The pantomime tradition inherited by colonial audiences featured diversified attractions assembled for the occasion. In 1785 a performance of a pantomime entitled *Harlequin's Revenge* featured rope dancing, eminent tumblers, two pantomime ballets, and a grand finale. The formula found its most appropriate expression in the early American circus. In 1794 a Philadelphia writer pointed out that among the performance accomplishments of the great equestrian, John Bill Ricketts, was the feat of dancing a hornpipe on a saddle as the horse galloped at full speed.¹³

¹³ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 5.

As many in today's audience regard the Broadway musical as a vehicle for entertainment only, so did the late-eighteenth-century American audience regard the circus as popular amusement designed to relax and enliven. Then as now, successful performance demanded skills associated with dance: physical control, discipline, agility, balance, and acrobatic talent. The means were the same, only the ends were different. In 1795 the Old America Company postponed the performance of a play rather than compete with the circus. The contemporary historian William Dunlap wrote, "*School for Scandal* gave way for Ricketts and Clown." No doubt, audiences received a considerable return for their investment in a ticket. Prices ranged from one dollar for a box to a half-dollar for the pit. So profitable was the enterprise that when Rickett's Troupe opened at the New York Amphitheatre on September 15, 1795, management funded all alterations of the place to fit the scenery, props, machinery, and "decoration."¹⁴

A more sophisticated use of movement took place

¹⁴ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 6.

in the pantomime ballets that offered dramatic action. Dramatic action should be *purposeful*. It should be organized so as to arouse a specific response, such as pity and fear, joy, ridicule or indignation, thoughtful contemplation, or laughter.¹⁵ Without speech (but with stylized gesture) to a musical accompaniment, the pantomime-ballets relied on stage movement to establish character, portray situations, and develop a plot. Traditionally, the form used two types of mime: (1) the artificial or symbolic gesture accepted by the audience as a convention, and (2) the expressive gesture derived from real life and recognized by the audience as such.

Mime makes narrative ballet possible, and the early American producers of the pantomime-ballet were quick to adapt existing dramatic and ballad opera material to theater pieces told in the language of movement. For instance, George Washington's favorite ballad opera (one of the most widely performed stage entertainments in America before 1800) was entitled *The Poor Soldier* and converted into the pantomime-ballet *Dermot and Kathleen*. The spin off proved so successful

¹⁵ Oscar G. Brockett, *The Theatre: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1997), 28.

that it received as many Philadelphia performances as did its model during the closing years of the eighteenth century.¹⁶

The success of the "pantomime-ballet" led the way to American audience acceptance of the nineteenth century Romantic ballet and a parade of European dancers who toured the United States. The critical and commercially successful tours of Fanny Elssler and Marie and Phillipe Taglioni fixed the Romantic ballet firmly in the affection of American audiences.

The impact of their presence impressed on American audiences more exacting standards of dance construction and performance than seen on the early American stage. The foreign dancers attracted to the American stage did not represent the best Europe had to offer. Yet America did attract dancers eager to escape Europe's political instability. The dancers whose attempts at ballet Theatre--however provincial--would later make possible a succession of visits from European superstars like Taglioni, Marius Petipa, and,

¹⁶ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 8.

most notably, Fanny Elssler.¹⁷

A Fanny Elssler tour began in 1840 and ran for two years of ecstatic reviews and box office. Her New York debut at the Park Theatre sold out for the entire two-week engagement, assuring the star a reported \$7,000 profit. The frenzy over and adoration of foreign ballet stars in America--which in our time involved the artistic defections of Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova, and Mikhail Baryshnikov--began over a century ago with the frenzied tribute accorded Fanny Elssler. Young men pulled her carriage through the streets of New York. Theater management in Baltimore auctioned tickets for her performances to the highest bidders. In Washington, D.C., the Congress of the United States adjourned so that its members could attend her performances. Still, her visit was a triumph of celebrity, nothing more, leaving no dramatic or aesthetic mark. When Elssler returned triumphantly to Europe, she left nineteenth-century America dance as she found it--poised somewhere between hornpipes,

¹⁷ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 11.

tightrope exhibitions, and vulgar entertainments on the one hand and the decidedly foreign "fancy dancing" of pantomime and Romantic ballet on the other.¹⁸

The European dance forms that dominated the musical stage of colonial and federal America yielded to a less refined but more vigorous and popular dancing wrought from the real and imagined heritage of the Afro-American slave. On plantations and the streets of New York, slave and city blacks danced to the accompaniment of chants and drums, rivaling each other in dances for pride or profit, and so begat a dance tradition whose elements are visible still on Broadway, film, and video.¹⁹

For the most part, African dances moved on the beat as a natural response of the entire body to the beat of the drum. Dances executed in unison aimed for direct correlation between the accent of the drumbeat and the earth-stomping beating of the feet sometimes relieved by the subtle variation of perfectly timed

¹⁸ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show dancing* (New York: Prentiss Hall Press, 1987), 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

pauses also executed in unison. The dances of Africa did not die in the socially inhospitable climate of the New World but adapted to the needs of the dancers to survive, please their owners, or entertain the landed gentry at public plantation entertainments. Soon, popular musical entertainments based on sentimental appraisals of plantation life from the white viewpoint swept the nation, on their way to becoming the most popular form of entertainment in the United States during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.²⁰ American show dance paused at a critical juncture. They called it minstrelsy. The source of minstrel show material was the soil of the Old South. A romantic image of plantation slaves with their comic antics, crooning melodies, and shuffling dances provided the model upon which the performers, shows and specialty acts patterned their material. Accompanied as they were by banjos, tambourines, and bone clappers, blackface minstrel songs provided splendid aural incentive for lively dance.

²⁰ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentiss Hall Press, 1987), 14.

After the Civil War, minstrel-show dance settled on a hybrid, derivative style, based on Northern white idealized or comic interpretations of plantation life, whose animation, vigor, and robust theatricality appeared to contemporary audiences to be more authentic, at least more appropriate to a show's subject matter, than the songs, their lyrics, the jokes, or the burlesque. Eventually, there arose a body of steps and dances and a style; it would sustain a century of American show dance through vaudeville, revue, nightclub acts, and early musical comedy.

When minstrelsy disappeared from the American scene, dance studios, choreographers, and popular performers still carried on its dance contributions. Just as the three separate acts of the minstrel-show format evolved into vaudeville, revue, and burlesque, so too would minstrel dance steps and styles continue in fanciful reincarnations on the popular stage and in the social dance of the American public. The Charleston craze of the 1920s incorporated the variation of the Juba dance involving the crossing and uncrossing of the hands back and forth across the knees. Bob Fosse's

staging of *Pippin* involved minstrelsy motifs, particularly in the number "War Is a Science." The show dance of the American stage absorbs its predecessors gently and by degrees.²¹

Vaudeville's ascendancy to America's premier form of entertainment during the decades that preceded and followed the turn of the century paralleled the extension and development of American show dance. It added to the fund of rhythmic jig and clog dances the decidedly new and different strains of ballroom, ethnic, toe dancing, and an energetic tap dancing that would come to dominate the musical entertainments of Broadway. Variety acts nourished the system that was vaudeville, and the variety of dance acts on the circuit attest to the diversity, vigor, and popularity of dance entertainment during this period.

More than any other entertainment in its time Vaudeville encouraged the quantitative and varietal expansion of dance acts before the public. Most vaudeville circuits included at least one song-and-

²¹ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentiss Hall Press, 1987), 22.

dance act or minimusical revue on the bill. The system valued uniqueness and encouraged diversity. Some dancers traded on talent or technique; others developed unusual material. There were Dutch dancers, Russian dancers, Irish dancers, blackface minstrel dancers, whiteface minstrel dancers, flash acts, class acts, toe dancers, knockabouts, acrobatic dancers, competition acts, and legomania. Even the celebrated originators of modern dance--Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman--did their stints in vaudeville.

Dancers then as now brought a unique body, a special way of moving, and highly individual attitudes and approaches to their own dancing and to their regard for the dancing of others. Unlike dancers, the musical entertainment artists who create librettos, music, lyrics, orchestrations, and set and costume designs leave some tangible, physical artifact that gives testimony to the material's existence and provides the data for present and future speculation. Words, musical notes, and design sketches exist in space. We can see them. They are tangible. Their form and substance are frozen in the symbols on the manuscript. The brief and

fleeting movements of dance exist in time, and during the vaudeville era it went unrecorded except in the muscle memory of the dancer or the kinetic memories of those blessed with them. The passage of time, the erosions of memory, and the absence of any permanent record of the dances themselves promote disagreement, dispute, and a record of fluctuating interpretations of the dances of the period. Nevertheless, some rough approximations can be made. Many of those approximations can be seen in Broadway Musical Theatre today.²²

In its original meaning, derived from the terminology of ballet, "eccentric dancing" issued from the talents and skills of the dancing comedian. Here the dancers put aside the ideal standards of correct position and movement to pursue the humorous effects inherent in the ludicrous posture, grotesque behavior, or some peculiar physical mannerism of the dancers themselves. To say that the eccentric dancer eschews the correct and precise models of the *danse d'ecole* in

²² Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentiss Hall Press, 1987), 24-6.

no way demeans the skill and craft of the performer or the artfulness of the performance. The best eccentric dancers achieve theatrical effect by labor, forethought, and precise calculation. What distinguishes their dance commodity is the unique intent and direction of performances that grow out of specialized gifts and a highly individual dance personality. Think of Ray Bolger's awkwardly tall and lean a torso tied to those splendid rubbery legs: The image defines the ideal outward shape and equipment for eccentric dancing, though Bolger's varied talents carried him beyond that narrow definition. To see what Bolger did with that equipment is to marvel at the dramatic, theatrical, or just pure entertainment goals achieved by such altogether unpromising means. Once established, however, eccentric specialties varied little from the original idea or the dance material derived from it. Early audiences expected that eccentric dancers would repeat their specialty despite context.

Only minor differences separated the eccentric dancer from the comic dancer. The eccentric dancer

exploited personal characteristics of body and movement; the comic dancer relied more on character and situation and inherent physical tools. Invariably, comic dancers made their reputation by capitalizing on the noticeably heightened, highly theatrical properties of comic stereotypes: James Barton as a society drunk leaning against a lamppost, Hal Leroy frisking about as a callow college freshman, Buster West's randy sailor, and Buddy Ebsen's country hick. The Idea, the story, the character, and the situation made the act, though some properties of the eccentric dancer figured into the execution of the material. However, contemporary reviews suggest an important distinction between the eccentric dancer and the comic dancer. All agree that both were funny, only the eccentric was funny for what he was while the comic dancer was funny for what he *did*.²³

Although ballet had been popular with the "elite" American audience since the pre-Civil War tour of Fanny Elssler, in the new circus and vaudeville

²³ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentiss Hall Press, 1987), 28.

era. Some ballet specialties did succeed, usually as spectacular but vulgar allegorical ballets or divertissements with a scenic embellishment and elaborate musical accompaniment. Others performed acrobatic dance or legomania specialties that they then termed "toe dancing." Unlike the flood of tap dancers who learned on the street, danced their own way, and borrowed steps from each other, the toe-dance specialties studied dance from an early age, conformed at least initially to the rules, of ballet discipline, and forged careers on dance material or skills peculiar to them.

Ethnic dance specialties of the more approximate than authentic variety inundated all forms of show business during the vaudeville era. Those dancers committed to the genre responded to the historical fact that theirs was an era of intense and widespread European immigration into the United States. Public performance responds to public demand, and the demand of many new Americans was for entertainment redolent of their homelands. If the singers and the comedians could exploit the audience of the American melting pot, then

why not the dancers? So the parade began, Irish, Italian, Scottish dances, Indian dances, Dutch dances, Russian dances, and so on, and on, and on. At the time, the ethnic dance strain added little to the show-dance tradition. Later, authentic reconstruction of ethnic dances would flow so vigorously into the mainstream of American show dance that they redirected the course of dance mode, preference, and style.²⁴

Stage dance in nineteenth century America was not an integral part of the dramatic action. It did little to move the plot forward or reveal character. However, the incidental dances of this period did function as spectacle that increased the audience's pleasure and formed a canon of work that would be integrated into the plots of Broadway Musicals in the twentieth century.

²⁴ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentiss Hall Press, 1987), 38-40.

CHAPTER 3

BROADWAY MUSICAL THEATRE

1866 - 1922

When the national mania for the minstrel show began to subside in the 1860s, the variety show replaced it, a succession of song-and-dance acts. It became a national institution called vaudeville. Vaudeville, though, was not a unified entertainment either, and musical comedy was not its direct descendant.

An event in 1866 established dance as the natural compliment of the musical play. The New York theatrical entrepreneurs Jarrett and Palmer had assembled a large troupe of European dancers under the leadership of the Italian ballet master David Costa, intending to present them in a lavish ballet, *La Biche au Bois*, at the Academy of Music on Fourteenth Street. Before the ballet opened the Academy burned down. William

Wheatley, the manager of the popular Niblo's Garden Theater, conceived the idea of incorporating the troupe, scenery, and costumes into a script in his possession entitled *The Black Crook*. The results were a music and dance extravaganza the likes of which New York had never seen. Costa crowded the stage with thirty ballerinas and fifty "Auxiliary Ladies" from Europe, not because of their skillful dancing but by virtue of their scanty costumes and apparently bare legs. The ballet overpowered the play, and it cannot be said that they fully integrated the dancing into the plot or advanced the dramatic action. Nevertheless, *The Black Crook* set the foundations for musical comedy, which included dancing as an important component.²⁵

When in 1868, Lydia Thompson arrived in New York with a group of buxom, broad-hipped ladies, the public turned its attention to another type of girly show. Thompson's burlesques were light musical satires in which the accent was on the comedy, songs, and dances. They stimulated a small industry within the

²⁵ Mary C. Henderson, *Theater in America*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 123.

entertainment world. Other theatrical promoters assembled and sent scores of troupes with different headliners all over North and South America.

Undoubtedly, the beefy chorines dressed in tights were the principal attraction of the shows, but several troupes, with Thompson's heading the list, featured artful solo and ensemble dancing. Each in his own way, David Costa and Lydia Thompson contributed to the rise of the chorus line as a successful fixture of later musical comedy.

An American producer, George Lederer, gave a significant push to theatrical dancing when he created the prototype of the revue in 1894. His presentation, entitled *The Passing Show*, was a mixture of songs, dances, and comedy sketches, held together by a thread of commentary on the previous theatrical season and current political and social events. In 1900 Lederer imported from England a line of precision dancers trained by John Tiller for the American operetta *The Casino Girl*. Tiller appears to have begun his career in the 1880s in England as the stager of church pageants that became renowned for the precision of their drills

and marches. He later moved into dance, opening a school first in London, then in New York. By standardizing the height of the dancers, and by putting them through rigorous training, he created chorus lines of from twelve to twenty performers that could be inserted easily into any type of theatrical musical entertainment. Tiller claimed to have invented the "pony ballet" a dance number in which petite girls performed a routine imitating horses. Lederer used it in *The Casino Girl*.

The Tiller Girls became a fixture in New York and never failed to please the crowd in the revues and shows of Florenz Ziegfeld and Charles B. Dillingham. By 1927 there were hundreds Tiller-trained girls throughout the world. Their triumph sparked American imitations, and each dance director made a personal and innovative contribution to the precision routines. The Tiller technique lives on in the dancing of Radio City Music Hall's Rockettes and such presentations as *La Cage Aux Folles* and *A Chorus Line*.²⁶

²⁶ Mary C. Henderson, *Theater in America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 124.

Tiller Girls filled the revues and musicals of the 1900-1920 era with dancing choruses, and it was no mean feat to get the small armies of performers on and off the stage. The job fell to someone halfway between director and choreographer, who functioned like a general marshaling his troops to music in dance routines. One of Ziegfeld's director-choreographers, Ned Wayburn, staged in his lifetime more than six hundred musical comedies, plays, revues, pantomimes, and dancing-school shows. He conducted his rehearsals wearing a whistle around his neck, which he blew to get the attention of the multitude of performers under his command. Wayburn, who had trained in vaudeville and worked for his father as a mechanical draftsman, used mathematics to attain precision in his chorus lines. He worked with the number eight and multiples of it, based on the musical scale. Dividing the stage into eight areas, he built up routines out of simple, basic steps, which he used in various permutations. Like a drill instructor, he put the "ponies" through their paces until they were motion perfect. He made each learn the steps verbally so she could "practice" them mentally

anywhere. Patient and methodical, he came up each year with hundreds of fresh and different routines for the musicals and revues he directed.²⁷

Historically concurrent with the trend setter dance directors were the innovators Seymour Felix, Albertina Rasch, and later, Robert Alton. Of the three, Seymour Felix, who choreographed the Rodgers and Hart shows *Peggy-Ann* (1926) and *Simple Simon* (1930), publicly described a more creatively ambitious, and dramatically motivated vision of show dance than had been encountered on the commercial dance scene. Not that he eschewed completely the pretty girls and the dances designed for public consumption. Rather, he believed that after a level of achievement consistent with contemporary standards, he should demand more of his profession so that he could achieve more. Like his best contemporaries, Felix sought dancers with youth, beauty, and a strong dance foundation. To his credit, Seymour Felix recognized as a dead end the cult of novelty and tricks that dominated the show dancing of

²⁷ Mary C. Henderson, *Theater in America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 126-7.

his time, When necessary, he could pull out the old stops with the best of them: high kicks, backbends, splits, cartwheels, military drills, the chorus line strut that stopped the show, and the double time Charleston that left the onlooker breathless. Uncharacteristically, Seymour Felix was not blind to his limitations. He assessed his professional milieu and the practices it encouraged with uncommon accuracy. "It was all very lovely, all very interesting," he admitted, "until the bag of tricks emptied." Prophetically, Felix sensed that the future of stage dance rested in an improved station within the total creative process. He reasoned that:

The best high kicker can kick no higher than the length of her legs; the daintiest, most graceful of young women can only dance a Charleston or a Black Bottom when she is supposed to dance a Charleston or a Black Bottom. In many instances, the chorus interlude became a colorful but negative interruption to the action or comedy of the musical comedy book.²⁸

This was not Agnes de Mille or George Balanchine talking about the prospects for theatre dance in the late 1930s or early 1940s. This was Seymour Felix discussing his work for Peggy-Ann in 1926. At that

²⁸ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 57.

early date, Felix set himself thinking about dance that "aided development" and kept in "the spirit of the show," a full decade before the earliest recognized commercial work of the ballet choreographers.

Classical ballet rarely prefigures in musical comedy in its pure form, unless the musical calls for such usage. Originally, almost any dramatic dance number was referred to as "ballet."

Although what we know of her dances and dancers does not invite critical scrutiny by today's standards of concept or execution, Albertina Rasch's sensitivity to the total dance world of her time--a sensitivity that nourished experimental show dancing--demands that she be included in the society of innovative dance directors. Hers was a commercially successful career built on a traditional ballet foundation, one that spanned three decades of Broadway Musicals and included such major critical and commercial hits as *Rio Rita* (1927), *The Band Wagon* (1931), and *Lady in the Dark* (1941). Mme. Rasch used the position of dance director to make the "fancy dancing" of ballet a salable

commodity in popular American show business.²⁹

Robert Alton may have been the most prolific dance director on the Broadway scene during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, with such shows to his credit as *Anything Goes*, *Pal Joey*, and *Me and Juliet*. In no production were the Robert Alton routines more dramatic or well received than in *Pal Joey* (1940), the show that Richard Rodgers regarded as "the most satisfying and mature work" to emerge from the Rodgers and Hart collaboration. That year the dance critic John Martin wrote in the *New York Times*:

Robert Alton, who created the dances for the show, has given . . . dancers some corking things to do. The routines themselves are nicely characterized and worked onto the scheme of the whole. Musical comedy devotees have not forgotten the stunning first-act finale which he staged for that other George Abbott show, "Too Many Girls," or how he made it part of the general action. Here his assignment has been altogether different and far more subtle, but he has taken advantage of the opportunity just as fully to make his numbers an integral part of the proceedings. His dream number in which Joey visualizes the night club of his ideals, the wonderfully common "Flower Garden of My Heart," the witty hunting dance, and the ingenious and comic "Do It the Hard Way," are delightfully smart and flavorful. Indeed, the whole production is so unified that the dance routines are virtually inseparable from the dramatic action.³⁰

The dance material of *Pal Joey* represents one of

²⁹ Mary C. Henderson, *Theater in America*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 127.

³⁰ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 66.

the earliest successful examples of concept as form. The dancers in this show depicted environment and their characters without any diminution of the brassy entertainment values then prized in musical shows.

In any case, the professional impact of dance directors diminished in direct proportion to the rise of collaborative choreographers like Balanchine and de Mille. The growing presence of ballet and modern dance on the American entertainment scene presented the new dance makers with bold and exciting options as to the type of dance employed and its function within the overall design of a show. Before the opening of Rodgers and Hart's *On Your Toes* in 1936, George Balanchine, the man responsible for the dances requested that his program credit read "Choreographed by . . ." rather than the customary "Dances by . . ." The producer agreed. The prospect of arousing public curiosity over an unfamiliar word opened intriguing new avenues for valuable publicity. George Balanchine started a revolution that would change forever the nature, scope, and function of American show dance.

Balanchine began his career with training at the

Russian Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg, followed by early choreographic opportunities in Russia and then in the West with Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Thus, by training and by temperament, he was inclined to regard dance as an expressive medium and a serious art. Balanchine created dances, not routines. He insisted that his work for the commercial theater be integral to the show's intent, not merely its decorative accessory. Earlier dance directors like Seymour Felix and Albertina Rasch had sought to connect their dances with some element of the show itself, usually the lyrics, but Balanchine's choreography for *On Your Toes* contributed vital information to the unfolding of the plot in repeatedly entertaining demonstrations of how viable dance expression could be as a method for advancing story by means other than song or scene. When the show was revived in 1982, Carol Lawson reported in the *New York Times* that:

On Your Toes was a turning point in the history of musical comedy, for Mr. Balanchine's dances were more than mere interludes. Instead they served as essential aspects of the plot, and were thoroughly integrated parts of the production.

Unfortunately, the original *New York Times* review

dated April 13, 1936, focused exclusively on the dancing of the performers, particularly the extraordinary contribution made by Ray Bolger. Besides reporting that the show included "a dry burlesque" of the Scheherazade ballet, and . . . a melodramatic ballet entitled "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," the reviewer devoted no critical space to the maker of the dances or the dances themselves.³¹

At her best, de Mille fashioned dance dramas for the commercial stage that developed out of the plot and advanced the action of the story. Her dancers appeared as characters in the show and not merely impersonal instruments for dance entertainment. De Mille assigned her dancers dramatic features previously reserved for actors and singers only--among them depth of character, motivation, and emotional content. Casting dancers as characters opened new horizons for the dancers and the drama. The dancing Laurie and the dancing Curly add to the total dramatic impact on the audience begun by their acted and sung counterparts, just as the

³¹ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 71-2.

dramatically established characters of Laurie and Curly give their dancers background and motivation for expressive movement.

All the great ballet companies before Balanchine's own established the fusion of dance and drama in performance as a major artistic priority. *Oklahoma!* brought that fusion to the popular stage. Suddenly gesture, movement, steps, turns, and lifts acquired layers of suggested meaning that were as indicative of the show's emotional and intellectual content as what the composer's musical notes connoted aurally. That was an important moment for show dancing and theater. When imitation and parody hastened the end of Agnes de Mille era choreography, Walter Kerr offered this reappraisal in the *New York Herald Tribune*:

What has been lost, for me, is emotion. At its best, current stage dancing has impact--a cold-blooded, calculating, haymaker thrust that is essentially concerned with keeping the "entire production" plunging onward. But nowhere to be seen--except in somewhat imperfectly restaged movement of *Brigadoon*--is that sudden, almost imperceptible, moth-like flutter of life that starts with the barest movement of the actors' bodies, flickers for a moment on the verge of definition, and then is--before you have caught the miracle in the act--deeply involved in stating some of the more touching truths of everybody's life. It happened in *Oklahoma!*, it happened between James Mitchell and Gemze de Lappe in *Paint Your Wagon*, and it happens when the girls lightly sweep away from the walls in *Brigadoon*.

Such dancing talks to the audience across the footlights. It says things like "here we move the plot forward," or "here we establish the tone and atmosphere of the scene." Or "here we explore some ideas built into this situation or setting." Dance directors worked for audience approval; choreographers work for audience enlightenment.³²

The director-choreographers who dominate the modern world of show dancing owe their privilege and power to the two pioneer choreographers, Balanchine and de Mille, who bequeathed to them a legacy: (1) a standard of serious artistry for Broadway Musicals, (2) a commitment to dance as a dramatic medium, (3) a considerable expansion of the modes of dance to be used on stage, (4) a new and more professionally important use of the dancers themselves, and (5) a choreography of the highest quality for dancers to dance, for audiences to see, and for future choreographers to embrace as a standard for their work.³³

³² Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 76-8

³³ *Ibid.*, 91.

CHAPTER 4

THE USE OF CHOREOGRAPHY TO

DRAMATIZE THE LIBRETTO

1922 - 1980

The Broadway Musical has evolved from a medium controlled by writers to a medium controlled by staging artists. The director-choreographer directs the speech, stages the songs, and choreographs the dances. The unified Broadway Musical predisposed to artistry and movement demands an overseer with the background and talent to coordinate its disparate elements into the stylish, homogeneous and artistically seamless phenomenon modern audiences now accept as the norm in Broadway Musicals.

Choreographers of the stature of Balanchine and Agnes de Mille documented the practical and artistic liabilities of staging and choreography made secondary to the other elements of a musical. Then two talents,

Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse, who were prepared to do something about those problems, appeared on the show-dance scene. They defined the role of movement in musicals, magnified its importance, and reversed the chain of command that governed the various artists during the preparation of a musical show. Banished were the mindless aesthetics that enslaved dance to the needs of producer, star, or a specialty act. This Alexander Woolcott review from the 1920s describes such musical staging, and it suggests the purpose and the power that account for it:

Down in the orchestra pit the violins chatter with excitement and the brasses blare. The spotlight turns white with expectation. Fifty beautiful girls in simple peasant costumes of satin and chiffon rush pell-mell onto the stage, all squealing simple peasant outcries of "Here she comes!" Fifty hussars in fatigue uniforms of ivory white and tomato bisque march on in columns of fours and kneel to express an emotion too strong for words. The lights swing to the gateway at the back and settle there. The house holds its breath. And on walks Marilyn Miller.³⁴

Once regarded as decorous "wallpaper," the staging and choreography chosen to set off the star attraction now became the star attractions themselves. The "wallpaper" became the all-embracing force that

³⁴ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 92-3.

took unto itself the music, drama, sets, costumes, lighting, and orchestrations that served its vision best. The dance director follows, the choreographer adapts, but the director-choreographer leads, and that has made all the difference. In the successful line of musical shows from *West Side Story* through *Fiddler on the Roof* to *A Chorus Line*, the concept and execution of the show's content responded most to the vision of the staging artist to whom the producers surrendered artistic control. The most striking modern musicals embrace the artistic philosophy, system, and look of total Theatre. Whether the director-choreographers responded to this phenomenon or helped to create it, their background, skills, and overall approach to a musical show blended the movement, music, and language into a seamless whole greater in performance than the sum of its parts.³⁵

Practical benefits accompanied the rise of the director-choreographers. A powerful individual responsible for everything the audience is meant to

³⁵ Robert Berkson, *Musical Theater Choreography*. (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1990), 88-9.

experience can reduce the gaps in the material and in communication between writer-collaborators. Productions rehearsed in a single studio reduce the chance of artists working at cross-purposes. A single creative environment that brings together the actors, singers, and dancers serve the best interests of all. For dancers and dancing, however, the most visible and welcome accomplishment of the director-choreographer remains in broadening the quantity, scope, and importance of movement and dance in the finished product. Writing in *Newsweek* a decade after the coming of Robbins and Fosse, Hubert Saal noted that:

. . . dance remains the essence of the Broadway musical, perhaps the most ineffable of America's lively arts. Body English is an eloquent language all its own. It may only be heightened or stylized movement, or a means of changing pace, or a stage full of exuberant bodies displaying raw energy, but the excitement of Broadway rhythm is as strong as ever.

No song could express the sexuality of Donna McKechnie shimmering her way through "Tick Tock" in *Company*, or the virility of Bobby Van gracefully tapping out love signals like a Morse code in *No, No, Nanette*. Hal Prince may have created the "new musical," but even he finds it hard to abandon the climactic punch of big production numbers. Of course, they're not the old-fashioned kind--arbitrary, coming from nowhere and going no place. The new breed of choreographers, following such ground breakers as Jerome Robbins, Agnes de Mille and Bob Fosse, has gone to great pains to integrate dance into the plot.³⁶

³⁶ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 94.

As any performer will tell you, added importance to an art brings with it added opportunities for its artists. The repertory of successful shows devised by director-choreographers offers the modern show dancer aesthetic and financial rewards, particularly the opportunity to step out of the chorus as many dancers did in *Pippin*; longer runs that secured for dancers a measure of financial stability, and more well paying jobs available in revival, summer stock, and touring packages of dance-oriented shows. In the recent past, plays dominated the summer theater circuits. Except occasional appearances by a beloved star or television personality in a dramatic vehicle, most of the summer theaters now offer recent musicals cast with the versatile dancers needed to make each show work. First-rate dancers have never been scarce in show business. In the past, however, their range was limited and their professional opportunities few. What the emergence of the director-choreographer has done for the show dancer is to usher in the best, most attractive, and a lucrative era of show dancing in the history of

American show business.³⁷

The shows themselves changed accordingly. Stories yielded to concept; dialogue gave way to dance. The Arthur Laurent's book for *West Side Story* illustrates the point. Since Jerome Robbins chose to communicate with the audience through the physical expression of movement and gesture, language symbols so gave way to dance images that the book stands among the most concise and compact of major American musicals. Since then, the musical has depended less on story or spoken dialogue than on song and dance, and the attendant devaluation of the book has not only inflated the importance of musical staging but demanded that director-choreographers intensify their level of inventiveness to meet their heightened professional responsibilities and audience expectation with appropriately exciting and expressive work.

As the director-choreographer revolutionized the modern musical show on paper, so also did they alter its appearance on stage. The modern musical *moves*, and

³⁷ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 94-5.

by no means do dancers alone monopolize the movement. Everything moves--scenery, props, lighting equipment, and the entire cast. When a show moves well, a unity of style persists--blocking with musical staging, musical staging with choreography. The term "blocking" refers to the process of arranging the stage movement of performers--traditionally, the responsibility of the director. The term "musical staging" refers to the process of moving singers, dancers, and actors around the stage in a musical number, at one time the responsibility of the director or the dance director. The term "choreography" refers to the process of creating the composition, steps, movement, and dynamics that constitute a dance--the traditional responsibility of the choreographer. Generally, these functions remained exclusive during the era of the dance directors, overlapped occasionally with the pioneer choreographers, and merged completely with the director-choreographers. From performers they must draw the characterization, feeling, and motivated behavior that are believable acting; on performers they must impose steps, patterns, and dynamics along with the

expressive quality needed to master the dance and make it theatrically effective; and from all they must elicit masterful compliance with the musical staging that brings the acting, song, and dance into meaningful harmony. As *Newsweek* asserted in 1971, the evolution of dance in the American Musical has transformed the choreographer to a director-choreographer, that is, "from pawn to king." The realm as constituted allowed for two sovereigns: Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse.³⁸

Jerome Robbins: the supreme architect of unerringly designed, expertly made dramatic dances from *On the Town* (1944) to *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). Jerome Robbins: master of violent, dramatic atmosphere--"The Rumble," *West Side story* (1957); childlike fantasy--*Peter Pan* (1954); the vaudeville and burlesque idiom--*Gypsy* (1959); and warmth and nostalgia--*Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). For twenty years the indispensable director, director-choreographer, and show doctor on the commercial scene and the first successful director-choreographer to guide the Broadway Musical in its

³⁸ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 96.

journey from a writer's medium to a staging medium. A critical appraisal of his career in commercial show business, before he abandoned it for a professional life committed to ballet choreography and a position with the New York City Ballet, reveals startling innovations that we accept now as routine practice in the creation of modern musicals. Robbins assigned to dance a primary role in the development of a show's dramatic and theatrical content as early as *On the Town*.

Robbins began to co-direct shows with George Abbott in the 1950s. In 1957 his work as director-choreographer for *West Side Story* so blended the drama, dance, music, decor, and performance into a seamless, homogeneous whole as to establish the movement-conceived musical as the wave of the future and elevate the position of director-choreographer to the status of "most vital constituent" in the evolution of the Broadway musical. Because of Jerome Robbins, the theory that choreographer control over an entire production could induce a more integrated effort characterized by unity of material, purpose, and style became reality.

Between *On the Town* ("That was my first musical and I had a lot to learn about staging dances") and *Fiddler on the Roof*, his last effort on Broadway, Robbins staged numbers in *High button Shoes*, *Miss Liberty*, *Call Me Madam*, and *The King and I*; supervised *Funny Girl*; and directed *Bells are Ringing*; in addition to working on shows cited previously. However, no show was more important than *West Side Story* and the innovations it launched.³⁹

Robbins conceived the choreographic interpretation of its major elements. On stage it played like a popular *ballet d'action* rendered in a vernacular movement vocabulary. It was the first musical to be conceived, directed, and choreographed by a single individual. If *Oklahoma!* demonstrated how serious an art form the song-and-dance musical might become, then *West Side Story* showed how serious an art form the movement musical might become. Serious, artistic, and successful though it was, the real accomplishment of the show was to open new and exciting

³⁹ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 96-7.

possibilities for the way musicals could be prepared and presented. Not only did Robbins shift the priorities among songs, drama, and dance, he also broke down the boundaries among them. In this new hybrid form, movement assimilated all the elements of a musical show. Whoever controlled the movement controlled the show.

True, the content of *West Side Story* proved ideally suited to the driving, violent, rhythmic dancing that became the show's form and style, but that's how the show was conceived. Choreographers before Robbins allowed content to dictate form, but none had successfully added to the equation the concept that dictated the content that dictated the form. According to an interview in the *New York Times*, the idea for *West Side Story* began around 1948 when an actor friend of Mr. Robbins who had been cast in *Romeo and Juliet* asked the choreographer for some help. According to Robbins:

I wondered, if I were acting, how I would go about it. When I began to see it in contemporary terms, it made sense. Romeo's passions are so extreme, so intense, so adolescent. It's all new and fresh. The love you're feeling is the greatest in the world. Death is nothing. The highest suicide rate is among

adolescents. I became fascinated by the subject.

When completed, the show resembled less the dramatic vehicle committed to a linear path of development many had expected, than some dark and foreboding cloud contracting and expanding in color, shape, and atmosphere until the final moment of dramatic and musical resolution that brings relief to the emotionally spent spectator.⁴⁰

If Jerome Robbins chose to maneuver his writers into creating ideal conditions for the organic development of dance material, then Bob Fosse chose to manipulate or impose, tamper with, or otherwise reconstruct the contribution of writers to make the material serviceable to his staging and choreography. Most notable in this regard was the "incredible amount of change" he wrought in *Pippin* (1972), changes for which Fosse openly assumed responsibility, credit, or blame. Discussing the creation of *Pippin* with Laurie Johnston of the *New York Times*, he said, "I don't think you would recognize the original material that Stuart

⁴⁰ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, . 1987), 98.

Ostrow [the producer] brought me a year ago." He continued:

I warned everybody to be ready for a lot of changes but I haven't got the kind of mind to say ahead of time, "It's going to be this way when we're finished." I get involved in the material and the people. And I never enjoyed rehearsals so much or had such a great cast--they really swung with me.

In this case, Fosse received "great freedom" from the book writer, Roger O. Hirson, and Stuart Ostrow, the producer. From composer and lyricist Stephen Schwartz, Fosse received anger, recriminations, and a major Broadway battle. However, as Martin Gottfried has pointed out, *Pippin* established Fosse as a show business force. He had sufficient artistic confidence to weather the storm and re-create the material as he saw fit.⁴¹

The rise of Bob Fosse to preeminent status among director-choreographers worked to the advantage of the performers as well. During the Broadway run of the musical *Redhead* (1959), a reporter for the *New York Times* asked the star, Gwen Verdon, why a "dance man" served her performance better than a "song man" or a

⁴¹ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 103.

"word man?" She replied:

With a choreographer like Bob Fosse as director, there are many things he can give you to do--such as a movement which will suggest a feeling, even when you are playing a scene. A choreographer is never afraid to move you around, while most directors have their mind on keeping you where you will be heard. You have more freedom. Choreographers have a greater sense of the visual, the composition of a scene, the look of a scene. You don't have to depend on words all the time.⁴²

Although Fosse discounts the notion of a "Fosse style," Fosse dancing achieves a distinctive look within the sleek, brassy, razzle-dazzle of the Fosse musical. Though outwardly akin to a combination of modern jazz dance and tap that can assimilate elements of ballet, burlesque, and social dance, the Fosse idiom wears a decidedly urban look built on the foundation of the gyrating body. Pelvic grinds, undulating shoulders, backward leans, hip isolations, and turned-in feet subject to a tremendous economy of movement describe the essence of that idiom. Little room for aerial ethereality here. Everything is earthbound, physical, percussive, and sexy.

Few choreographers on the commercial dance scene celebrate the physical sexuality of male and female

⁴² Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 105.

dancers as much as Bob Fosse. Arlene Croce in *Going to the Dance* described the look as "classic Fosse twitch and slink," that accounts for his no-holds-barred assault on audience sensibility. Fosse dancer Ann Reinking believes that the Fosse repertory is a "whole new way of moving" that demands considerable skill from the dancer. "It requires severe controls and extreme freedom. If you go for one and not the other, you're not doing it right." To help them "do it right," Fosse provides his dancers with the motivation of the dramatic actor to get behind the concept, situation, and steps he gives them to perform. Said he, "I try to supply them with consistent images of what the ultimate accomplishment should be . . . something the dancers can play and think about while performing."⁴³

⁴³ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 106.

CHAPTER 5

THE STATE OF THE ART

Dance in the theatre may be divided into two basic types: incidental and dramatic. Incidental dances are not an integral part of the dramatic action; they include ballets inserted into operas and folk dances or specialty numbers used to enliven a play or to set a mood without influencing the action. Dances are also sometimes used as between-act entertainment. Incidental dance serves principally as a diversion. It may be extended, shortened, or omitted since it is not essential to the play's development.

Dramatic dance, on the other hand, forwards the story, reveals character, or establishes mood and style. It cannot be left out without seriously damaging the dramatic action. It includes ballets, modern dance compositions, and danced portions of musical comedies

and plays.⁴⁴

In ancient Greece, Dramatic dances were many and known by a variety of names. The *Knismos* seems to have been an exotic dance originating from Persia. The *eklaktisma* was a woman's dance, apparently of bold and abandoned character, a sort of Greek can-can, it involved kicking the legs above the head. Another highly lascivious dance, mentioned by the comic playwright Kratinos and Aristophanes, was the *apakinos*, or shimmy. Greek dance is simply one of the actor's modes of expression, and was accepted as such.

Dance in the Theatre can be seen as a counterpart to song. In passages of heightened emotion, language often shifts from the iambic trimeters normal for speech and dialogue to more agitated lyric meters. This is normally observable even in translation: the lines are shorter, the rhythms more complex. Greek actors punctuated their roles with arias: when Antigone goes to her death, she *sings* of her sorrow. We can surmise the same relationship between dramatic movement

⁴⁴ Oscar G. Brockett, *The Theatre: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 662

and dance. At high points in the action, normal movement quickens into dance rhythm. We can therefore apply Greek dancing to Greek acting as a whole.⁴⁵

Just as every dance number has a dramatic and structural purpose in the overall scheme of the show, every movement within the number should have both a dramatic and structural reason to be there. The music, with its progression of themes, moods, and events, dictates when incidents occur and how long they transpire. It is the musical sequence's dramatic premise which is the foundation of the dance movements. Each dance number resembles a short one-act play in several respects. In both the dance number and the one-act play, the audience begins in ignorance of what is to come. Ideas must be cogently presented, strongly developed, and convincingly resolved over the duration of the piece. The format follows the formula of the well-made play: exposition, rising action, climax, and fall to ending. The brief time element of a musical number, however, usually does not allow much

⁴⁵ Peter D. Arnott, *Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1989), 56.

time for denouement.

Every musical comedy must have a plot to maintain audience interest, and another crucial element, a sense of dramatic conflict. Within the dance number itself, the musical variations that create this sense of conflict maintain the audience's interest because they interfere with and delay a resolution. The choreographer must explore the dramatic and structural factors which prevent the character or plot from moving to point A, and then on to point B. A simple crossing of the stage can become an entire drama if we continually block the path and hinder the hero by various means. The motivations of the characters must be apparent for the piece to make sense or elicit an empathic response.⁴⁶

Where the non-musical theater employs dialogue and action to carry the plot to another logical stage of development, the musical theater relies on song and dance. The "Dream Ballet" that concludes Act I of *Oklahoma!* Takes the plot from Laurie's indecision to a

⁴⁶ Robert Berkson, *Musical Theater Choreography*. (New York: Guptill Publications, 1990), 74-5.

dramatic action whose motive the ballet reveals to the audience. Agnes de Mille comments:

The dances were innovative in that I linked them tightly to the drama. I was aware very sensitively of the play, its style and its needs, and the dances I designed were neither blocks to the action nor ornaments. Rather, they augmented the characters and they complimented the text and lyrics.⁴⁷

Among the revolutionary accomplishments of *Oklahoma!* was the discovery that the techniques of dance could be used to project the ideas of the book with no loss in dramatic credibility or suspension of audience disbelief. If a song can be a scene, why can't a dance be a scene? Rodgers and Hammerstein assigned Act II, Scene 3, of *The King and I* to the ballet sequence "The Small House of Uncle Thomas," in which a stylized dance-narration of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exhibits in a microcosm the musical play's twin themes of slavery and oppression.

When musical theater directors explore the alternatives to dialogue for projecting the elements of the book, two possibilities occur: song and dance. Songs replace dialogue with compact language set to music; dance replaces dialogue with images of movement

⁴⁷ Agnes de Mille, *America Dances* (New York: Macmillan Publishing co., 1980), 188.

set to music. The advantage of dance? Movement defines and develops *action* more naturally than language. Consequently, dance scenes account for the brevity of the action-packed *West Side story* book.

When the show needs a rapid forward movement of the plot, dance can initiate, advance, or complete the desired dramatic action. In *West Side Story*, Jerome Robbins used dance to develop dramatic action between the Jets and the Sharks in the "prologue," and advance the dramatic action during "The Dance at the Gym." Through a dance sequence of only forty measures of music, Tony and Maria meet each other during "The Dance at the Gym," and fall in love--an action that could have taken pages of dialogue to develop.⁴⁸

Robert Alton a prolific dance director on Broadway during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, with such shows to his credit as *Anything Goes*, *Pal Joey*, and *Me and Juliet*. Robert Alton routines more dramatic and well received. About, *Pal Joey* (1940), the dance critic John Martin wrote in the *New York Times*:

⁴⁸ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 187.

Robert Alton, who created the dances for the show, has given . . . dancers some corking things to do. The routines themselves are nicely characterized and worked onto the scheme of the whole. Musical comedy devotees have not forgotten the stunning first-act finale which he staged for that other George Abbott show, "Too Many Girls," or how he made it part of the general action. Here his assignment has been altogether different and far more subtle, but he has taken advantage of the opportunity just as fully to make his numbers an integral part of the proceedings. His dream number in which Joey visualizes the night club of his ideals, the wonderfully common "Flower Garden of My Heart," the witty hunting dance, and the ingenious and comic "Do It the Hard Way," are delightfully smart and flavorsome. Indeed, the whole production is so unified that the dance routines are virtually inseparable from the dramatic action.⁴⁹

The American musical theater has grown with its public. The dance spectacle that was once an attractive garnish now constitutes an essential ingredient in the preparation of the show. In the work of director-choreographers like Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse, spectacular theater dance makes a parallel contribution to the dramatic action in the modern musical show.

Progression and pacing are part of what contribute to spectacle in a show, and the impact of the individual dances. Among the possible segments are the opening number, solo, duet, male or female ensemble, production number, ballet sequence, and

⁴⁹ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 66.

crossover. Although the opening number evolved from the "bring-on-the-girls-in-a-lively-routine" formula of early musical comedy, its place and function in the serious modern musical theater eschew cheap entertainment for the opportunity to demonstrate to the audience in physical terms the who, what, when, where, and how of the show to follow. The Jerome Robbins choreography for "Tradition" (*Fiddler on the Roof*) gives physical form to the show's immediate answer to each question. "Tradition" was conceived as a line dance that used circle imagery, Robbins saw the religious and social tradition of the Jews as a circle that embraced all who believed and excluded all who did not. In addition, the content and staging of the number introduced the audience to the characters, theme, time, locale, and method of the entire show. Tevye, the mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters of Anatevka constitute the who. The what: Jewish tradition. The when and where: Czarist Russia. The how: a story told primarily in the universal language of dance.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show Dancing*. (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 186-7.

With romantic love a staple in the musical theater, choreographers cannot afford to ignore the possibilities of the duet, a dance composition for two performers. What language can only signify of the physical character of a relationship, dance can establish through concrete images. Complementary body positions, harmonious movement, and affectionate gesture are themselves the expression of romantic love, not merely symbols, like language, once removed from the fact. However, not all duets are amorous. Any relationship that permits physical expression invites choreographic treatment.

Audiences accept male or female ensemble dances as an inevitable dance category because human beings tend to congregate in sexually exclusive groups for special activities, social functions, and entertainment. Since conflicts must delay the inevitable romantic resolution for nearly the entire length of most musical shows, male and female group dances offer opportunities for support, comment, or contrast to both sides of the battle between the sexes. They also outline period atmosphere, in reflecting the

masculine and feminine styles of different eras.⁵¹

In the production number, the entire dance ensemble contributes to a purposeful spectacle. The production number represents the choreographer's most collaborative effort as dance joins music, lyrics, performers, set, costumes, and orchestration in a joyous and full musical theater moment. Dramatic dance is alive and well on Broadway.

⁵¹ Richard Kislán, *Hoofing on Broadway: A History of Show dancing* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 188.

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